

[Minnie Caranfa]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (CHECK
ONE)

PUB. THESE ARE OUR LIVES

TITLE MINNIE CARANFA

WRITER SEYMOUR BUCK

DATE July 22, 1939 WDS. PP. 12

CHECKER

SOURCES GIVEN (?)

COMMENTS

Date: July 22, 1939

Submitted by: Seymour D. Buck - Newburyport, Mass.

WPA Workers (Mrs.) Minnie Caranfa

Consulted 139 Merrimac Street

WPA Occupation: Worker on WPA Household-Aid Project.

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Minnie Caranfa planted her feet solidly on the kitchen linoleum and waved a beefy arm toward the outspread newspaper.

"I don't know what you heard about me, but you might's well know, if it's anything to do with that junk in the "Liberator," you can just skip it? Think I'm going to let any old lady go around calling me a goddam whore and get away with it? What if she is damned near seventy, - she'd ought to know better by now. The judge found her guilty, too. When he told my lawyer man 'at I'd ought'v settled things like that outa court, I got right up and told him something. "Listen, Mister," I said to him, "what Minnie Caranfa does at 139 Merrimac Street's her business, and no goddam body else's!

"Now, every week they got to print some goddam thing in the paper about me and my friends. Hell with them. I got my home here. I'm trying to fix things nice for me and the boy, and everybody's got to thinking I'm like a bunch of these women in this burg - running around alla time. It's not so, see?

"Mebby my friend comes to see me sometimes, so what? I get lonesome, sitting around alone nights, same's anybody else.

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Besides, that's different than around. Don't worry, I get chances enough. Minnie's only 36, even now. Christ, every salesman comes here seems to think he's gotta date me up. Hell, I'm watchin' myself, I am. Think I don't know about them dames has to quit workin' once a week so's to go into Boston to the free clinics?

"Marry again? Don't make me laugh. I wouldn't get married again, to the best man ever lived. Look at how it was with me. I was only seventeen and a half when I got married to Lawrence. Minute work got slack with him in the shoe shop, and he found I could keep right on doing housework by the day, it didn't take him long to get used to sitting around all day, did it?

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"Fifteen years he's been gone, now. He's got a good job, working down Long Island, someplace. Forty bucks a week, and every week, I mean. Sends me five bucks a week for the boy. That's how come I hadda get onto the ERA, - using that five bucks to pay rent with, and when it got so's I couldn't even get a pair of curtains to do up for two-bits, I hadda get some way of buying grub for the kid and me.

"s'pose Lawrie sends for the kid to come visit him?" I asked the Mayor. "I used his money each week for rent, and now he's got no clothes fit to dress up in. You got to either get me a job to earn enough to pay rent and food and lights, - or by the Jesus, lemme go work with them other punks on the sewing projeck.

"Ever since then, I been getting my money each week, and 3 Minnie Caranfa's not one to forget who give her the work. Believe me, if people's really stick up for theirselves they'd get someplace. Hell, everybody's lost their guts, these days.

"No sense us standing here in the kitchen like this, is there? I guess you got some questions you want to ask, likely, anyway. As long as you aint trying to make out I'm something which I aint, it's O.K. with me..

"How you like my new ice-box? It's one of the new "GE's" and its Ace number one. There's a little place under the coil to keep stuff frozen, - Jeez it'll even keep store ice cream hard, and that's the first time I ever seen anything like that.

"I hadda have it, that's all. With my boy working over to the Beach, getting home all hours for meals, and with me out of the house givin' enemas to WPA workers all day, Christ I want my food like it's fit to eat.

"My friend says he's just as glad, anyway, not to have the ice-man pokin' his head in here alla time, anyway. Aint he a scream?

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"I got the house pretty well fixed up, now, and I sure hate to have to get laid off. I don't know how I'll make out, if this vacation business comes through like they say. Christ, why don't the bastards admit there's so many out of work that WPA as is don't keep half of 'em busy, 'stead of giving us the bum's rush just to make room for a lotta guys more, - we'll have a goddam nice chance ever seein' our checks rollin' again, I'll say.

"Telephone? Yeah, - that's a laugh. The Social Worker, - 4 she kinda kicked on that, too, - but it's like I told her[,?] "Jeez, lady, there's guys on WPA got cars, aint there? They all gotta have them to cart each other back and forth from City Hall to the Artichoke, - how about me? I get little odd jobs, sometimes, this way. A lady calls up, - her son's comin' home from Bar Harbor for the week-end, and would I mind just running up and giving the place a once-over in a hurry? It's worth dough to me.

"My friend was here that time, and he says, real nice, "If it makes any difference, ma'm, I'd be glad to see that the bill's paid regular, so's Minnie can keep it." That made everything all jakey, then.

"What burns people up is because my friend don't live far from here, anyhow, - I aint mentionin' any names, see? - I gotta admit, I'm sorry he's married, but Hell, if his own woman don't think enough of him to try to do anything about it, - why I gotta worry, huh? Besides, everything's on the up and up, - no dirty stuff at all, see? People can't seem to see that just bein' with each other, talkin' about things and all, can make a whole lot of difference how you feel when you get up next day.

"I got a good looking place, here, and I aint ashamed for anybody to know it. What the Hell, Lawrie's eighteen, now, and he's all I got. I got to have a decent place for him to go and bring his friends to, aint I? My friend thought it was too bad for me to have to go runnin' back and forth between the kitchen and from room every time I wanted the radio, so he got me one of them little "Acey-Decey" sets, whatever you call 'em, - and I 5 got it right out here over the sink, handy, huh? It's nice, so.

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Minnie led the way through the dining room, furnished with a complete dining room set, from sideboard to red-leather covered chairs. In the front hallway neat curtains hung over the door, and the hall-tree contained stylish, new womens' coats on hangars.

Crossing the spotless rug, Minnie indicated a comfortable leather rocker near the street window, while she flung herself with careless disregard for disposition of her short, tight-fitting black skirt, on one end of an overstuffed davenport.

"Smoke? No, thanks, I don't. Or drink," she added a trifle suspiciously. Smiling, then, she added with a grin, "You see, I gotta be careful, I gotta watch out, boy. Sometimes me and my friend, we split a bottle of ale, or something, but I got to watch myself.

"What I said about not marryin' the best man ever lived kinda stuck in your crop? Hell, don't mind that! Maybe I'd get hitched again, IF — If they was a man'd be good to me. If he'd work, too, like he'd ought to, to support me. Trouble is, there aint many good men left. One's got to alla time have his way on you, and then wonder why'n Hell you can't work good next day, or he's gotta lose his job, and life off'n your earnings. Nertz!

"No, sir. I finally told my husband to up and get to Hell out, - and he did! That was when Lawrie was only four, and 6 ever since I been trying to fix things nice for me and the boy.

"Christ, look at my husband, what happened to him? He married again, - but boy, he had a job first, you bet. Then his wife got "TB" - or had it, and died inside three years. I guess he's been runnin' around on the loose, since, until this summer.

"sfunny, you know it? I just happened to tell Lawrie one week-end, "Why don't you get on the Greyhound, and ride down to visit with your Pa?" He went down there, and what you think?

"My old man's gone back to Italy, - to get him another wife! Jesus Christ, I says to myself, - not tellin' Lawrie how I felt, natural, - he's gone and done it again. Wasn't satisfied with

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an American this time, - they're too smart for him, - he's gonna get him a young piece from the old country! Then he can be the big shot, - and take her way across the ocean to the U.S.A.! She's getting a break, though, I guess, at that. Not what Mussoline aint O.K.," Minnie went on cautiously. "I aint sayin' a thing about that. All I hear, if it hadn't a been for him, things'd be a lot tougher over there than they is now. Only, over here in this country, - well, look what they done to F.D. - he started out bein' a Mussolini, and the minute the people begun to get more'n the big shots thought was O.K. - they shut down on him, - more every day.

"Born here in Newburyport? Not me, thank God! I aint no native of this goddam hole. No, I come from Haverhill, I did. My folks still live up there, but the old man's too old to do any work, anymore. Ma's sick with puss in her kidneys, - and I only 7 hope she can just live comfortable until it's over. Funny, she's the one keeps thinking everything'll be O.K. in this country. My old man says the hard times we had aint nothin' to what's coming.

"Way he figures things, if they go keeping these guys on wondering if they're gonna have work all a time, pretty soon, when they take it away from 'em, the guys'll figure they got a right to make their own work, - and it won't be Boy Scouts, neither.

"I'm trying to fix things up nice here. I got my curtains from Sears, - they're awful nice to trade with. I tried out Spiegels', - but Hell, honest I never seen such stuff, no kidding. My friend tells me down in the shoe shop they're awful particular with things from Sears', - but if they got something not quite a "first" - but not tough enough for rejects, - then it goes sailing into a bin, - for Spiegels'. Swell way to do business, aint it?

"You got to expect to take it on the chin, though, if you go buying mail-order, anyway. I like to watch the papers, and when they's a sale, you'll find Minnie right there in the front row every time. I have to borrow from my friend sometimes, but I always pay it right back next check. Hell, when you can get yourself a \$22.50 coat for five bucks, why go around looking like Hell?

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"Where'll I be five years from now? Jeez, - you tell me! Way things are, I don't know nothin' about - nothin'! As long's I got my WPA work regular, I can squeeze by, - just about. If that goes, Minnie's gonna be parked on the City Hall doorsteps when they open up in the morning! I aint been around this town for nothing.

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Hell with it? I want work, - and I got all the time a telephone to answer, if there is any. That goddam thing don't ring, now, one week t'the next, 'less it's a wrong number. There aint any work - not in this town. Christ, I can't work in the shoe shops. The smell of the cement just gets me - all through here." Minnie rubbed pudgy hands across her breasts and down over her protruding abdomen.

"Only thing I know is housework, - and theyaint enough of that, anymore. I only know I'm not going to go hungry, - and I'm not going to wait until I've hocked every goddam piece of furniture I got before they gotta help me, either. That's old stuff, boy.

"Lawrie? Oh, he can't work - inside. It'd kill him. You see, ever since about ten, he's been sick alla time with asthma. It's something wicked, sometimes. Doctor coming in the middle of the night, and everything. No, he's gotta be outdoors about all the time. That stuff costs extra too, you know. Jeez, it's a wonder I got two dimes to rub together, - my friend says he don't see how I manage. I watch the pennies," Minnie stated proudly, "and I'm not one of them kind to throw my money around on a good time, like some.

"Worry? Jesus, do I! Nights I can't sleep, - just lie there and watch my goddam legs twitch. It's terrible! Next day, you'll be in somebody's house, - and you'll see things so tough it 9 makes you figure they's others lots worse over than you are.

"The real trouble with everything? Christ, tell me! I don't read much but the papers, - and I gotta admit they're mostly crap somebody wants to put in, - not read. Hell, I got eyes, but

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I get so sick, mostly, what I see, I just go on minding my own business. Trouble coming, though, if this WPA business all goes to Hell.

“You can't make other people understand all the different kinds there are on it,” Minnie stated firmly. “If they'd just take a goddam good look at everybody, - see all the kinds, - old and young, smart and dumb, - all banged together - it's some pitcher!

“What with these strikes, now, I'm afraid we got a black eye, all over. I don't see why it's any fairer for them guys who are striking to work only half time and get paid's much as we do, anyway. Who the Hell are they's what I'd like to know. Aint we all in the same trough? Hell, - give us grub enough and what we got to have, and let us all push our own way, I say.

“Now, though, those guys in the new gov'ment are mad! They figure we're striking against them! Hell, we aint the only ones. If you're asking me, it's like my friend says, he says, “Minnie, big business's pullin' the strike, - and it's a permanent one, 'slong as you WPA bums hold out.’ Aint that swell, now.

“If us Americans'd stick together, instead of letting 10 the goddam Jews swarm all over the place, things might be better, anyhow. Look at how it is in the movies. You gotta stand up and listen to the Star Spangled Banner every time you want to see a show. Hell, I'm no Jesus' Witness, - but for Christ' sake, you'd think we was all aliens or something, and hadda be taught to like the looks of our own flag, or something. It burns me up, boy. Them Jews out in Hollywood, - look at their names on every goddam picture - Produced By - Directed By - even the guys that own the banks they keep their money in - all Jews, every goddam one of them!

“Americans left here in these parts just aint got the guts enough to throw, anymore! This town's different, if you don't know it already. Shoe shops, - run by Jews. Let some goddam kyke come along - like Fiegenbaum, - you know him, - “Feel-Your-Bottom” they call him, - let him stick his goddam ugly map up into yours and feel your behind, or else — and the

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more you let him feel, the better job you get next week? That's no crap, - ask anybody works in there. They'll all tell you the same! Sure thing! What the Hell you going to do about it? Jobs are there, - rotten, stinking ones, - but a job, - and them's got 'em are hanging on — goddam tight to 'em, too.

“You think you could buy a pair of “seconds” for yourself? Like Hell! “Sorry,” the forelady'll tell you, “but all our seconds are sold in case lots.” Sure, - 'n then you'll see some dame come home from Boston raving about the new wine-colored suedes 11 she got to a Jew place down by North Station. Swell stuff, boy!

“Jeez, I didn't know I'd been going on so long. It's most dark out. Well, I guess we can get along for a little yet, without the light, huh? Like my friend says, “Jeez, Minnie, you sure hate to waste anything.” What the Hell!

“I guess I musta told you damn near everything about myself, by now, way I been going along, I wisht all this stuff about us WPA guys could really be writ up - and them bastards aint got no use for us be MADE to read it, if it choked 'em! They aint going to listen to us. Wait'll we're fired, - and gotta have charity some more. Wait'll the Mayor squawks, - and then the big shots down to Boston got to raise dough to keep things going - by Jesus, before snow falls them guys in the new gov'ment'll be goddam glad to have the U.S.A. footin' the bill 'stead of them! They aint gonna have no thoughts then but how the quickets they can shut us up, you see.

“Way I'm beginning to look at things is it's every dog for his own bone, - and the one growls the loudest without letting go, usually keeps it longest! My friend told me that, and it's right, too, you know it?

“That guy's been an awful good friend to me, just the same. He's working down to City Hall alla time, and I guess he pretty nears what's going on with the big shots down there. He

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don't seem to worry a Hell of a lot, seems to be kind of easy-going, - but then, like I've told him, "Hell, if I had your job, 12 I'd think everything was Aces number One, too, yessirree.

"Gotta be going already? Hell, the evening's young, yet. Sit down. My friend's over to the Beach to the wrestling match, - he won't be barging in till damn near midnight, — he probably won't be in tonight, at all," Minnie confided, moving restlessly on the davenport. "Like to dance? — Oh, well, Hell, you can't be that way, alla time. Gotta have a little fun or what the Hell's the use of living at all, huh?

"O.K. - well, drop by again, some night, when you aint all hot and bothered about WPA. Hell, we'll get by! It's who you know - not what you know, counts nowadays, - and as long's I aint taking any crap from any of 'em down to City Hall, I guess I'll still be Minnie Caranfa, - hanging on by her shirt straps. So long."